

A Qualitative Research On Influencing Factors Of Art Exam Tutors' Professional Identity Formation In An Exam-Oriented Education Context

Zhang Yidi¹ and Liu Siyuan²

¹Faculty of Education, Language, Music Psychology, SEGI University, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

²Graduate School of Business, SEGI University, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

¹nicole19941989@gmail.com, ²caluml@qq.com

Orchid Id number: ¹0009-0004-0394-6317, ²0009-0003-3238-4029

Corresponding Author*: Zhang Yidi.

Abstract :

This qualitative study explores the factors influencing the professional identity formation of art exam tutors within China's exam-oriented educational context. Situated in two private art exam training institutions in Shandong Province, the research utilizes qualitative research guided by Clandinin and Connelly's three-dimensional narrative space framework and Beijaard's theory of teacher identity. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six experienced art exam tutors. Through thematic coding analysis, the findings reveal that tutors' identities are shaped by complex interactions across temporal, social, and spatial dimensions. Temporally, early educational experiences, pivotal career transitions, and future professional aspirations significantly influence tutors' identities. Socially, national educational policies, exam-oriented culture, market-driven institutional pressures, and micro-level interactions with students and administrators shape tutors' professional self-perceptions. Spatial factors, including teaching environments and regional cultural variations, further contextualize their experiences. The study highlights the tensions art exam tutors navigate between educational ideals and practical demands, providing insights into the identity struggles unique to this underexplored educational group. These findings contribute to broader discussions on supporting art educators' professional development within challenging educational settings.

Keywords: Art Education, Art exam, Art exam tutors, Professional identity, Exam-oriented education context.

1) INTRODUCTION

In China's exam-oriented education system, curriculum design and resource allocation have long been dominated by high-stakes standardized testing, leading to the marginalization of arts education in mainstream schooling (Wang, 2015). Despite repeated calls in national policy to elevate the status of the arts, implementation remains superficial, with many schools reducing or eliminating arts classes to prioritize core academic subjects (Liao & Zhu, 2020; Ma, 2022). This structural imbalance has driven students and families to seek alternative forms of support—most notably, through privately operated art exam training institutions that prepare students for the Art College Entrance Examination (ACEE) (Wang, 2021; Xue & Fang, 2021).

Originally designed to assess students' artistic potential, the ACEE has increasingly functioned as an alternative pathway to higher education for those struggling in general academic tracks (Qiao, 2020; Liu & Wang, 2021). As a result, the phenomenon widely known as the "art exam fever" has taken shape, marked by a surge in examinees, growing parental investment, and the rapid commercialization of art exam preparation (Zhou & Lan, 2020; Ma, 2023; Xie, 2022). Yet, this expansion has also reconfigured the professional ecology of art education—particularly for art exam tutors who operate at the intersection of artistic cultivation and exam performance.

Within this dualistic and often contradictory framework, tutors are tasked with balancing the aesthetic values of art education with the pragmatism of standardized assessments (Liu & Sammons, 2021; Lin, 2020). They must meet institutional demands for exam results while also

contending with job insecurity, role overload, and ambiguous professional status (Huang, Intarasompun, & Puchatree, 2023; Xiong, Li, & Hu, 2020). These conditions have raised urgent questions about how art exam tutors perceive and construct their professional identities under exam-driven pressures.

Although teacher identity has become a central theme in global educational research (Dikilitaş & Bahrami, 2022; Arroyo, 2021; Prawiro, 2021), the lived experiences of tutors in China's private, high-stakes art exam sector remain understudied. This research aims to fill that gap by exploring the multifaceted factors that shape the identity formation of art exam tutors in an exam-oriented context. Through a qualitative narrative lens, the study contributes to ongoing debates about teacher professionalism, educational equity, and the cultural politics of art education in contemporary China.

2) LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1) Conceptualizing Teacher Identity

Teacher identity has emerged as a pivotal construct in understanding the complexities of teaching practice and professional development. It encompasses how teachers define themselves and make sense of their roles in relation to personal beliefs, institutional structures, and sociocultural contexts (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). As Zhao (2022) points out, teacher identity directly affects instructional decision-making, motivation, resilience, and well-being, all of which are essential for sustainable professional growth. In the high-stakes, exam-driven context of Chinese education, understanding teacher identity offers critical insights into how teachers exercise agency amid external constraints.

Recent scholarship has increasingly highlighted the nuanced and emotionally embedded nature of teacher identity, especially in contexts such as art education where tensions between creativity and standardization are pronounced. Arroyo (2021) argues that professional identity not only shapes pedagogical approaches but also mediates the emotional labor and interpersonal dynamics of the classroom. In highly commercialized or privatized educational sectors, studies by Huang et al. (2023) and Xiong et al. (2020) reveal how teachers often experience identity fragmentation and role conflict, resulting in heightened stress and diminished professional fulfillment.

Among various theoretical perspectives on teacher identity, the framework proposed by Beijaard and colleagues has been particularly influential. Their early work (Beijaard et al., 2000; 2004) conceptualized teacher identity as comprising three interrelated dimensions: subject matter expertise, pedagogical competence, and professional relationships. This model shifted the focus from fixed traits to the dynamic nature of identity, emphasizing its formation through interaction, reflection, and professional experience.

More recently, Beijaard et al. (2023) have reconceptualized teacher identity as “a complex configuration of personal and environmental factors,” shaped through “an internal and iterative process of reconciling personal beliefs and contextual demands.” This perspective foregrounds the dynamic, relational, and agentic dimensions of identity, highlighting the existence of sub-identities that evolve over time and across contexts. Teacher identity, in this sense, is never static; it is continuously negotiated and reconstructed in response to shifting personal and institutional landscapes.

In this study, Beijaard's expanded theoretical model provides an analytical lens through which to explore the identity construction of art exam tutors in China. As educators navigating the interstices of instruction, performance, and market expectations, these tutors exemplify the complexities of modern teacher identity—fluid, situated, and shaped by both inner convictions and external pressures.

2.2) The Three-dimensional Narrative Space Framework

Rooted in Dewey's (1934, 1981, 1986) view of experience as continuous, interactive, and socially situated, the three-dimensional narrative space proposed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) provides a foundational framework for understanding identity through stories. This conceptual model comprises three interconnected dimensions—temporality, sociality, and place—which enable narrative researchers to attend to the complexities of how experiences unfold, are remembered, and are reinterpreted in diverse sociocultural contexts.

Temporality refers to the dynamic interplay between past, present, and future. In narrative inquiry, events are not isolated snapshots but are embedded within a temporal flow, shaping and being shaped by what came before and what is anticipated to come (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Carr, 1986). This temporal dimension emphasizes the importance of tracing the continuity and transformation of professional identity over time.

Sociality involves both the personal and interpersonal aspects of experience. The inward aspect centers on the individual's feelings, moral commitments, and aesthetic responses, while the outward aspect focuses on their interactions with social, cultural, institutional, and familial contexts (Clandinin, 2009). This dual orientation highlights how identity formation is not merely an internal reflection, but also a response to external relational demands.

Place, the third dimension, foregrounds the significance of physical and symbolic locations in shaping human experience. Classrooms, art studios, and training centers are not neutral backdrops; rather, they are deeply implicated in the construction of teachers' professional narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By situating participants' stories within specific spatial contexts, researchers can better understand how physical settings and institutional discourses intersect with identity development.

Together, these dimensions offer a holistic and ontologically grounded approach to narrative research. Rather than treating narratives as mere recollections of events, this framework allows researchers to examine the layered and evolving nature of experience, emphasizing how art exam tutors construct, reframe, and relive their professional identities through time, relationships, and space.

3) METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the professional identity formation of art exam tutors situated within the pressures of China's exam-oriented education system. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate given the study's aim to interpret participants' lived experiences, narrated perspectives, and evolving self-understandings in complex institutional contexts. Data were collected from two private art exam training institutions in Shandong Province—pseudonymized as Institution A and Institution B. As one of China's most competitive regions for higher education admissions, Shandong also maintains a dense network of art exam preparation centers (Shandong Provincial Education Examination Institute, 2006; Shandong Provincial Department of Education, 2021). Institution A was a large-scale, well-established training school with a structured curriculum and a long history of exam success, while Institution B was smaller, newer, and characterized by its flexible and adaptive instructional style. The contrasting institutional characteristics provided a valuable basis for examining how different educational ecologies influence the identity trajectories of tutors in commercialized, exam-driven environments.

The study engaged six teacher participants from the two selected institutions, comprising both male and female tutors aged between 27 and 39, with teaching experience ranging from six to sixteen years. Their educational backgrounds varied from undergraduate to master's level, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. To capture the complexity of their professional identity construction, data collection combined multiple qualitative instruments: life story interviews, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. The life story interviews were designed to elicit participants' narrative accounts of their personal histories, career trajectories, and evolving perceptions of teaching, while the follow-up semi-structured interviews explored

contextual factors influencing identity formation, such as institutional expectations, policy changes, and student interactions. Classroom observations, guided by Merriam's (2016) model, offered supplementary insights into the participants' pedagogical practices, spatial positioning, and relational dynamics with students. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically coded using a hybrid inductive-deductive approach. Thematic categories were constructed through iterative comparison across cases, with particular attention to recurring patterns related to motivation, role conflict, professional values, and external pressures. This process enabled a contextualized understanding of how art exam tutors' identities were shaped, challenged, and redefined within the high-stakes educational landscape.

4) FINDINGS

This chapter presents the thematic findings of the study, organized around the three-dimensional narrative space framework—sociality, temporality, and spatiality. Each dimension is further broken down into specific themes that reflect the complex, multilayered factors shaping the professional identity of art exam tutors.

4.1) Sociality

In narrative inquiry, sociality refers to both personal and contextual dimensions of experience, including “social, cultural, institutional, and familial conditions” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). This section presents findings across three social levels—macro, meso, and micro—to illuminate how these social conditions shape the identity of art exam tutors.

4.1.1) Macro-social Level

At the macro-social level, four key themes emerged: national policies and educational structures, exam-oriented culture, social labeling, and market-driven logic.

4.1.1.1) National Policies and Educational Structures

Existing research has demonstrated the significant influence of policy and educational structures on teacher identity (Thomas, 2005; Sørdeide, 2007; Suarez & McGrath, 2022). Recent national policy reforms have significantly restructured the art exam education system, and have affected tutors' identity through multiple pathways. The rise in academic thresholds has marginalized traditionally non-academic student groups, challenging tutors' perceptions of who their students are and what success means. The standardization of curriculum and assessment has constrained pedagogical flexibility, forcing tutors to align with more rigid expectations. Moreover, shifting student recruitment patterns and increased pressure for exam results have intensified the focus on performance outcomes. These structural changes require tutors not only to adapt their teaching strategies, but also to renegotiate their professional values and self-positioning within an increasingly regulated and exam-driven environment. As Giudici (2020) notes, “educational policy is often understood as a multi-layered process, composed of several interconnected stages” (p. 801), and its cascading effects have been felt clearly in tutors' daily teaching.

On the other hand, the professional legitimacy of art exam tutors remains ambiguous under current educational policy and institutional frameworks. As private-sector educators, many operate outside formal teacher certification systems, and few receive systematic pedagogical training. According to a teacher participant, “We art exam tutors have never gone through formal or structured professional training. Most of us just start teaching right away.” This lack of standardized qualification contributes to a perception of uneven teaching quality and complicates how tutors themselves understand their status as “teachers.” Without official certification or institutional recognition, their role is often marginalized within the broader discourse of education, despite their significant involvement in student development and exam preparation.

4.1.1.2 Exam-oriented Culture

The exam-oriented culture deeply embedded in China's educational landscape has a profound impact on how art exam tutors construct their professional identity. In this system, success is narrowly defined by standardized test results, pushing tutors to prioritize score-driven outcomes over artistic development or holistic education. As Kirkpatrick and Zang (2011) point out, "exam-centric education causes extreme stress for students because tests are regarded as a means to prove their worth... Such education downplays the ultimate purpose of education: critical thinking" (p. 40). Within this logic, tutors are often positioned as performance facilitators, with their professional worth measured by students' exam scores. Guo et al. (2016) describe this transformation as one where "teaching becomes a technical, instrumental task linked to extrinsic rewards rather than an ethically professional practice founded upon trust" (p. 3).

In the art exam context, this logic reshapes tutors' identity boundaries by limiting their role to skill-deliverers and score-optimizers. The space for cultivating aesthetic sensibilities or reflective thinking is gradually reduced, which many tutors experience as a kind of internal displacement. While some strive to reclaim a sense of artistic purpose, others gradually internalize a utilitarian logic of teaching, reinforcing the identity of being merely an "exam tutor" rather than a "teacher of art." Such tension between institutional pressures and personal aspirations constitutes a recurring identity dilemma in their narratives.

4.1.1.3 Social Labeling

The social labeling of art exam education—affecting institutions, teachers, and students alike—serves as a powerful force in shaping the professional identity of art exam tutors. Labels such as "non-core," "supplementary," or even "commercial" circulate within public discourse, often implying a lack of legitimacy or educational value. Elliott and Stokes-Casey (2019) argue that "actual and perceived labels have the potential to not only marginalize but also diminish the work and professional status of art teachers within communities of learning" (p. 34). In this study, participants frequently reported being perceived as less professional than teachers of academic subjects, partly due to the unregulated nature of art exam institutions and the absence of formal certification systems. Simultaneously, negative stereotypes attached to art exam students—such as being "underachievers" or "shortcut-seekers"—indirectly devalue tutors' work and create persistent identity dilemmas. These overlapping layers of symbolic devaluation construct a social context in which tutors must constantly defend the legitimacy of their roles, not only to others but also to themselves.

4.1.1.4 Market-driven Logic

The marketization of education has fostered a utilitarian performance culture in art exam institutions, where admission rates become the core indicator of institutional and teacher success. Under these conditions, tutors are often reduced to agents of output and efficiency, expected to deliver quantifiable results under the pressure of enrollment targets. As Skerritt (2018) notes, neoliberal discourses "discursively construct teacher identity in relation to performative accountability" (p. 495), marginalizing pedagogical values such as care, creativity, and autonomy. This performance culture is further intensified by cost-cutting management strategies that generate inequitable staffing, excessive workloads, and precarious working conditions. Tutors frequently report unstable teaching hours, minimal institutional support, and constrained opportunities for professional growth. Within this transactional context, tutors experience tension between survival and integrity, as their professional identity is constantly negotiated between institutional compliance and personal ideals.

4.1.2) Meso-institutional Level

At the meso-institutional level, the professional identity of art exam tutors is shaped through their day-to-day interactions with institutional management and students, revealing how workplace relationships mediate their sense of role, agency, and value.

4.1.2.1) Interaction with Management

Institutional management practices played a crucial role in shaping art exam tutors' professional identity. For many tutors, managerial interference—especially performance-driven supervision—was experienced as a constraint on their pedagogical autonomy and sense of professionalism. Managers frequently linked teachers' value to student exam results and institutional enrollment success. As a participant described, "We must produce good results, because the supervisor still needs to recruit students". This comment reflects how managerial pressure, often rooted in institutional survival, became internalized by tutors as a measure of self-worth, reshaping their identity into that of result-oriented performers rather than educational facilitators. Research shows that when managerial systems emphasize market logics over pedagogical trust, teachers' autonomy and identity may be diminished (van Lankveld et al., 2017; Ghafar Samar et al., 2011). Many tutors in this study reported limited space for professional voice, restricted curricular freedom, and emotional fatigue caused by constant performance monitoring.

However, not all managerial interactions were constraining. Some tutors reported that supportive and communicative leadership helped affirm their value and fostered a sense of belonging within the institution. When managers recognized tutors' expertise and included them in decision-making, teachers reported stronger role clarity and commitment. This highlights the duality of institutional influence: while managerial control may erode professional identity, supportive engagement can empower tutors and reinforce their self-perception as legitimate educators.

4.1.2.2) Interaction with Students

Art exam tutors' interactions with students serve as a powerful source of professional identity reinforcement, particularly through emotional bonding and intergenerational resonance. One participant metaphorically described her teaching as "teaching my past self," illustrating how the tutors often perceive their students as reflections of their own earlier struggles and aspirations. This connection enhances not only relational closeness but also solidifies the tutors' own sense of professional belonging. These embodied experiences form what Caine et al. (2013) term "relational reverberations," wherein the tutors' past and present selves coalesce through the living relationship with students.

As Frymier and Houser (2000) point out, student-teacher relationships that are built on mutual understanding, negotiation, and shared goals can enhance not only learning outcomes but also the teachers' own sense of identity. For many participants, the act of being emotionally present for their students—crying together after performances, staying late to rehearse, or offering personal advice—was not a secondary aspect of their work, but central to how they defined themselves as teachers.

4.1.3 Micro-personal Level

At the micro-personal level, tutors' identity formation is closely influenced by their professional competence and value, and their passion towards art.

4.1.3.1 Professional Competence

Tutors' perceptions of professional competence emerged as a core influence on their identity construction. As Epstein and Hundert (2002) define, professional competence involves the "habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice" (p. 226). For many art exam tutors, artistic

expertise served as both the foundation of credibility and the benchmark of identity. Participants expressed a strong desire to maintain and develop their aesthetic sensitivity and disciplinary knowledge to avoid “losing touch” with the artistic core of their profession.

At the same time, competence in exam-oriented strategies—such as understanding policy shifts, mastering portfolio requirements, and crafting “score-maximizing” rehearsal plans—was considered crucial for surviving in the high-stakes test culture. Some tutors demonstrated considerable pedagogical insight, adapting lesson plans to different student profiles and innovating classroom management approaches. As one participant described, “Being a good teacher here is not just about knowing art, but knowing how to deliver it to kids who may be here for very different reasons.” Together, these three dimensions—artistic expertise, test-oriented strategy, and pedagogical skill—intersect to shape a professional self-concept that is constantly negotiated and redefined in practice.

4.1.3.2 Professional Value

The internalization of professional values plays a pivotal role in shaping art exam tutors’ sense of purpose, ethical stance, and long-term professional direction. These values are not merely abstract ideals but are rooted in daily practices, interpersonal commitments, and emotional investments in students. Many tutors expressed a deep sense of fulfillment and emotional reward when witnessing their students’ progress and achievements, which affirms their efforts and strengthens their professional identity. As one participant described, “When a student who was once abandoned by other teachers suddenly shows potential, I feel like I made a difference.” This sense of moral reward, rather than external recognition, sustains many tutors in the face of systemic challenges.

In addition to emotional fulfillment, professional conscience and educational philosophies also significantly shape how tutors perceive their roles. Some participants emphasized a strong moral obligation to support students’ futures, while others spoke of their aspiration to be a “strict but inspiring teacher” or a role model in both art and conduct. These philosophies, though diverse, reflect a shared belief in the ethical and educational mission of art education. As Weis and Schank (2002) argue, “Values reflect our commitments and influence our perceptions... they guide our behavior even if we do not articulate them to ourselves or others” (p. 271). In this sense, tutors’ professional values serve not only as internal compasses but also as frameworks through which they evaluate their work, navigate contradictions, and sustain their identity in the fast-changing exam-oriented education landscape.

4.1.3.3) Passion and Commitment to Art

A deep-seated passion for art and a sustained commitment to art-related work were key motivators shaping tutors’ identity formation. Many participants entered the profession not as a strategic choice, but as a continuation of their personal trajectory within the arts. For some, working in an art exam institution was not a detour, but “the only place where I can stay close to art and still make a living.” James Hall (2010) notes that “the vast majority of intending teachers of art and design are motivated by a very strong subject allegiance and by an equally strong sense of personal identity” (p. 104). This dual identification—as both art educators and practicing or aspiring artists—was echoed by many tutors, whose emotional passion for art itself provided tutors with a deep source of meaning and resilience. Despite the exam-driven nature of the job, tutors often sought to preserve a connection to their artistic ideals, and this affective attachment helped them resist burnout and reconnect with their inner identity. For many, teaching art was not simply a job—it was the only way they knew how to stay alive to their own creativity.

4.2) Temporality

Temporality frames teacher identity as a narrative evolving across past, present, and future. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasize, “lives are temporal... situated in time, which is itself unfolding and enfolding of experience” (p. 19), highlighting the fluid and non-linear nature of teacher identity. This section explores how tutors’ early education, career shifts, and future visions shape their evolving self-understanding as teachers.

4.2.1) Early Educational Experience

Early educational experiences—particularly those related to family influence, formative student years, and inspiring past teachers—played a foundational role in shaping tutors’ evolving teacher identity. As Goodson and Sikes (2001) argue, “there is a significant connection between the professional ideologies and behaviors of teachers and their personal lives,” suggesting that long before entering the classroom, one’s orientation to teaching is often seeded through lived experience. For many tutors, memories of their own struggles as art exam candidates were vividly retained and often evoked during moments of teaching. These recollections fostered empathy and informed their decisions to support students emotionally, not just technically.

Family background also emerged as a vital influence. As Atkinson (1998) noted, the family of origin profoundly shapes identity formation, because “the environment we are born into plays a greater role in how we adapt to the surrounding world than the things themselves.” Many tutors described being raised in educational households or environments that emphasized discipline, cultural capital, or artistic appreciation. These early exposures contributed to how they perceived the purpose of teaching and their role within it.

Finally, several tutors mentioned influential former teachers who served as early role models—either through admiration or contrast. Whether trying to emulate the care and passion of a past mentor or avoid the harshness of a former authority figure, these early images provided reference points in how they defined who they were, and who they did not want to become, as teachers.

4.2.2) Career Turning Points

Career turning points reflect how tutors interpret their evolving identity across time. Rather than dramatic events, these were often personally meaningful experiences that shifted their self-perception. As Clausen (1995) explains, turning points are “subjective accounts of lived experience which involve some degree of change in situation, behaviour, or meaning” (as cited in Rönkä et al., 2002, p. 48).

Many tutors described gaining confidence through teaching practice. As one participant recalled, “At that very moment, I realized I could become a teacher.” These realizations often marked a shift from feeling like a student to recognizing oneself as an educator. External affirmation—from students or colleagues—further validated their sense of role and direction. For some, helping students also revealed new meanings in teaching, reinforcing their long-term commitment. These moments were not isolated—they became key nodes in the ongoing temporal narrative of becoming a teacher.

4.2.3) Prediction of Future Career

Thinking about the future allows art exam tutors to navigate the evolving landscape of their profession. As Hamman et al. (2013) argue, “possible selves provide self-relevant targets for regulating effort, persistence and direction of behaviors” (p. 309), thus anchoring future aspirations in the construction of current identity. In this study, participants frequently referred to their imagined futures—some expressed a clear vision of an aspirational professional self, while others revealed concerns about the sustainability of their role and the unpredictability of the art

training industry. This tension between idealized future selves and realistic constraints became an important site for identity negotiation.

For some tutors, future career identity was rooted in an enduring passion for art education. They envisioned themselves continuing to inspire students, developing pedagogical innovations, and enhancing their subject expertise. Such future-oriented thinking not only provided motivational scaffolding but also fostered resilience amidst current structural constraints. However, this hopeful imagination often coexisted with anxiety—participants voiced doubts about long-term career stability, citing shifting policy climates, declining student enrollment, and limited institutional recognition of their role. These reflections revealed an oscillation between hope and uncertainty. As Hamman et al. (2013) noted, “thinking about one’s self in the future may be particularly salient to the newest teachers, who are striving and negotiating the identity of the teacher they will become” (p. 308), a statement that resonates powerfully with our participants’ narratives.

4.3) Spatiality

Spatiality draws attention to the specific physical, cultural, and institutional contexts in which teacher identity is enacted. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasize, “place is where the action occurs, where characters are formed, and where cultural and social influences are at play” (p. 50). This section explores how regional culture, spatial inequality, and everyday teaching environments shape tutors’ sense of who they are and where they belong.

4.3.1) Teaching Environment

Tutors’ perceptions of their teaching environment significantly shaped how they enacted and interpreted their professional identity. While some described their workspaces as relatively flexible and low-pressure—allowing autonomy in scheduling and teaching content—others highlighted limitations caused by poor facilities and inadequate resources. These environmental conditions not only shaped their teaching practice but also contributed to feelings of marginalization, particularly for those in smaller institutions or remote regions.

Prosser and Trigwell (1997) found that teachers who perceived greater control over what and how they taught, manageable class sizes, and departmental support were more likely to adopt student-focused, conceptually oriented teaching approaches. These environmental affordances also supported a stronger sense of professional efficacy and satisfaction. In contrast, negative teaching environments were often internalized by tutors as evidence of their low status within the broader educational system, weakening their sense of belonging and identity stability.

4.3.2) Regional Culture

Regional culture significantly shaped how tutors perceived and valued their roles. In culturally conservative areas like Shandong, longstanding traditions—such as Confucian respect for teachers—gave tutors a strong sense of moral legitimacy and social identity. Participants described teaching as “the best job” or took pride in being from “Confucius’s hometown,” showing how regional narratives validated their career choice.

As Sun (2025) notes, regional culture offers “a cohesive emotional bond and symbolic identity” that enhances one’s sense of belonging. However, such ideals also set rigid expectations—teachers were often imagined as morally upright and self-sacrificing. For many tutors, this brought both affirmation and pressure, reinforcing a cultural framework that continued to define what it means to be a teacher.

4.3.3) Structural Spatial Inequality

Structural spatial inequality profoundly shaped the educational access and career trajectories of art exam tutors, especially those who emerged from small-town or rural settings. These regions were frequently marked by limited educational resources, weaker institutional capacity of art training centres, and narrower exposure to artistic experiences. As one participant expressed, being from a county-level town meant “never having seen the world,” reflecting the restricted cultural and informational environment that can constrain educational aspirations and development.

Existing research has noted that “youth from rural areas are underrepresented in higher education,” and “the probability of enrolment in HE increases according to the urban character of the environment in the individual’s upbringing” (Zahl-Thanem & Rye, 2024, p. 1068). This spatial gradient in educational opportunity results in fewer rural students accessing high-quality instruction or experiencing the aesthetic breadth necessary for comprehensive art education. The problem is not merely the lack of universities but a systemic regional disadvantage that shapes students’ motivation, learning conditions, and eventually, the pool of future art educators.

These disparities directly impact the formation of professional identity among art exam tutors. Participants who had grown up in disadvantaged rural contexts often internalized feelings of deficiency and marginality, which later influenced their confidence and sense of legitimacy as teachers. Others reported a persistent awareness of educational inequality and perceived their return to rural teaching as a form of compensation for systemic spatial neglect.

5) CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the multifaceted factors influencing the professional identity construction of art exam tutors within China’s exam-oriented education system. Through narrative inquiry guided by the three-dimensional space framework—temporality, sociality, and spatiality—this research illuminated how identity is not fixed but constructed through dynamic intersections of lived experiences across time, context, and relationship.

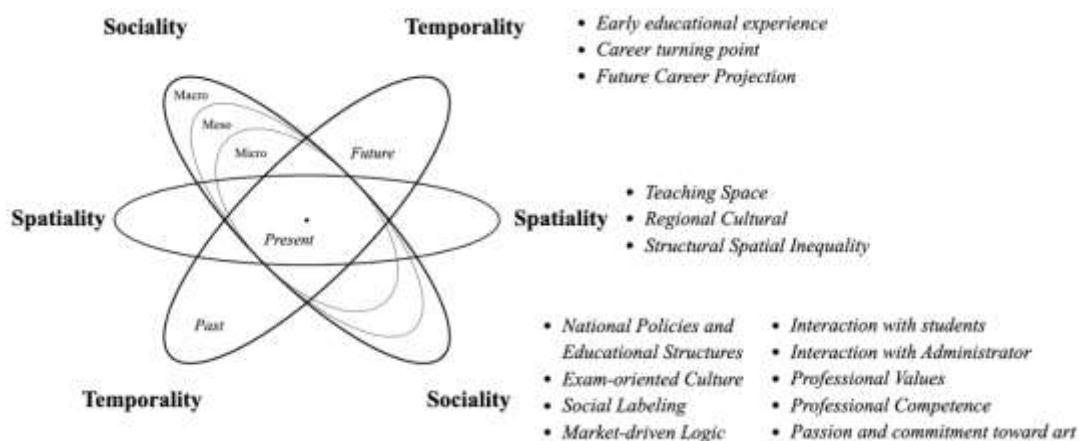


Figure 1. The Framework of Influencing Factors of Art Exam Tutors’ Professional Identity Formation

As visually summarized in Figure 1, the findings reveal that teacher identity among art exam tutors is shaped by a constellation of interlocking influences: from early educational memories and career turning points, to future aspirations and anxieties; from policy structures and institutional dynamics to intimate interactions with students, administrators, and the self; and from ideological regional cultures to everyday material teaching environments. These identity elements do not operate in isolation. Rather, they intersect in unique temporal arcs, social

contexts, and spatial conditions, reinforcing the need to understand teacher identity as both contextual and processual.

Importantly, this study highlights how art exam tutors—often overlooked in formal teacher education discourse—negotiate their roles in highly pragmatic, unstable, and emotionally intensive teaching environments. Their identities are marked not only by vulnerability, but also by passion, resilience, and an evolving sense of purpose.

While this study offers in-depth insight into the identity experiences of art exam tutors, it is limited by its focus on a specific cultural and educational context, and further comparative research across other educational systems would be beneficial. Nonetheless, it opens up new space for understanding teacher identity as a narrative, contextual, and multilayered construction—particularly for those working in marginal or unconventional teaching environments. This research provides new insight into how marginalized educators in non-traditional teaching spaces construct professional meaning. It also calls for broader recognition of art exam tutors as legitimate educational actors, worthy of scholarly, institutional, and policy attention.

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